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# The Castrati ("Skoptsy") Sect in Russia

## History, Teaching, and Religious Practice

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This paper outlines the history of the Russian mystical Castrati (*Skoptsy*) sect and suggests a brief analysis of the principal religious practice of the Castrati: their technique of ecstatic sessions (*radenie*). The Castrati sect was related to the sect of Christ-believers (*hristovoveroy* or *hlysty*) in the second part of the eighteenth century, and borrowed their practice of the ecstatic dances. The founder of the Castrati sect was a Russian peasant, Kondraty Selivanov, whose personality and personal experience exerted a powerful influence on the teaching and rituals. In the Castrati sect, the idea of castration as the only way to become liberated from sin and to obtain holiness became mixed together with religious worship of a highly ecstatic and expressive character. The roots of the connection between these two sides (i.e., castration and ecstasis) of the Castrati practice can be traced to the transpersonal level of perinatal experience related to the Basic Perinatal Matrixes (BPM) described by Stanislav Grof.

### I. CHRISTIAN SECTARIANISM IN RUSSIA: GENERAL SURVEY

THE HISTORY of Christian sectarianism in Russia began in the second half of the seventeenth century. Some of its trends (e.g., small groups which lost their old significance), after different changes and transformations, exist even today, being a kind of relic of a social and religious conflict which was very serious in older times but is now almost forgotten.

It is in the sectarian teachings and forms of the religious service that the religious dissidence of the Russian folk mostly appeared: non-Orthodox and openly antiecclesiastical by its nature. The ways to achieve religious salvation "discovered" by mystical and rationalistic sects differed essentially from one another, but all of them were grounded in the direct connection with God, which excluded the Church as mediator between the believers and God.

In Czarist Russia the Orthodox faith was the state official religion; during the Synod period, when there was no patriarchy in the Russian church (1721-1917), the Russian Orthodox Church was a part of the state ruling machine. Church as well as State considered sectarian dissent to be a

dangerous enemy; therefore, they took harsh police measures to eliminate the sectarian movements. In the 1840s the sectarian problem was given over to the Ministry of the Inner Affairs (MIA, i.e., the Ministry of Police) to solve. Thus, the majority of our information concerning the leaders of the communities of the sectarians, their teachings, and the forms of the religious services of the sectarians, as well as about their ways of life and their traditions, and so on, that is, all the information which was the foundation for innumerable "antisectarian" publications and governmental decrees, was extracted from the materials kept in the archives of the MIA, including the materials of the trials, reports of the "repented" sectarians, priests and special officers of the Ministry, and so on. The origin of the major part of the sources has determined the critical apprehension of them by contemporary researchers.

### II. THE CHRIST-BELIEVERS

AT THE time of its appearance, the first sectarian movement was a sect of the Christ-believers, but the sectarians called themselves "the God people." The term "Christ-believers"



reflects the main point of their doctrine: every adept is able to become Christ. This sect is well known in the Russian literature as *hlystovstvo* or *hlystovschina*: there was an existing opinion, that in their gatherings, after attainment of some ecstatic states, the believers beat themselves with belts (*hlyst* in Russian), repeating the words, "I am beating myself, I am seeking for Christ" (*Sebya hlyshchu, Hrista ishchu*). In this case, the word *hlyst* may be translated as "flagellant." But there are no documents from the sectarian communities supporting the view that such a practice really took place anywhere. Also, the necessity of flagellation does not follow from the religious teaching of the sectarians. The accusations that the sectarians engaged in bloody sacrifices were also absolutely groundless (Mel'nikov, 1869, p. 387). Mel'nikov reproduced a legend (he referred to "The Investigations" of Dmitry of Rostov) about "christlings" ("baby-christs") which were the fruits of the so-called "Christ's love." According to "The Investigations," they had to be ritually killed by the sectarians with the blow of a spear in the left side of the baby's body (as in the case of the crucified Jesus and in the Church rite of the Eucharist); then the sectarians drank the baby's blood. The body of the sacrificed baby then had to be dried and changed into powder which in turn had to be added to the bread used with the water for the sectarians' "Eucharist." But it was Mel'nikov himself who confirmed the statement that this crime was never found and demonstrated by the juridical investigation (Mel'nikov, 1869, p. 388).

The doctrines of the majority of the Russian sects mostly originated in the folk milieu which contained its own religious images of salvation. Sectarian teachings were patterned after the frames of the Christian soteriological paradigm, accepting, nevertheless, the traditions of the Russian popular faith rather than the ideas of the New Testament. The sectarians denied the authority of the "letter" of the Holy Writings and the scriptural tradition as such. On the other hand, they believed in the revelation of the Holy Ghost as the principal source of their teachings. These two attitudes could not stimulate the process of formalization and systematization of the vague images into a coherent symbolism of the faith.

The founder of the sect of the Christ-believers was a peasant from Kostroma, Danila Filippovich. The miraculous story tells us that the Lord Sabaoth, on a chariot of fire, among the heavenly powers, descended in glory on Mount Gorodina

(Vladimir district). The heavenly powers returned to Heaven but Lord Sabaoth stayed on the earth, obtaining the purest body of Danila Filippovich, who then became the living God himself. His living place was near the town of Kostroma. He taught about spiritual prayer which can stimulate the Divine Spirit to enter the body of the praying person. To show that religious books of any kind are useless for salvation, he put old (written and published before Patriarch Nikon's reform) and new books into a sack, throwing it into the Volga River: "Do not believe in the books. Believe in the Holy Ghost only!"

He transmitted his teaching epitomized in Twelve Commitments:

1. I am the God predicted by the prophets; I descended to the earth to save human souls; there is no God but me.
2. There is no other teaching. Do not seek for it.
3. You are established in this teaching—stay here firmly.
4. Keep God's commitment to catch the Universe (cf. Jesus told Simon, "Stop being afraid. From now on you are going to catch people"—Luke 5:10).
5. Do not drink alcohol; do not commit the sin of flesh.
6. Do not marry. Married people must live with wives as if they are their sisters. If you are unmarried—do not marry; if you are married—become unmarried.
7. Do not use foul words; do not pronounce them.
8. Do not visit marriages and christenings; do not participate in drunken chats.
9. Do not steal. If you steal only a penny, in the other world this penny will be put on the top of your head and when it melts from the hellish fire you will be in pain.
10. Keep these commitments in secrecy; do not tell them even to your father and mother. If you are beaten with the belt or fired by flame—be patient! Those who will be faithful will obtain the Heavenly Kingdom and spiritual joy on the earth.
11. Visit each other, share bread and salt, and be in love among you, keep my commitments, pray to God.
12. Believe in the Holy Ghost.

There is no God besides Lord Sabaoth, but his son Christ perpetually incarnates in human bodies. The first "Christ" of the Christ-believers was Ivan Suslov. According to their legends, fifteen years before the miracle on Mount Gorodina, a hundred-year-old peasant woman gave birth to a son. A local priest refused to baptize him for some weeks; nobody agreed to become his Christian parents. But nevertheless there appeared a man who baptized the baby by himself, giving him the name



of John (Ivan). Until he was thirty years old he lived with his father, but later Ivan was called by Lord Sabaoth Danila Filippovich to follow him. For three days he ascended Ivan Suslov to Heaven thus "giving to him His Divinity." The preaching of Suslov became known to Czar Aleksey Mikhailovich. Suslov and his followers were captured but he refused to confess his "crimes." That is why on Thursday he was crucified on the Kremlin wall near the Spassky ("Savior's") Gates. On Friday he was buried on the "Skull Place," but on Sunday night he was resurrected before witnesses. Then he appeared in front of his disciples in a village near Moscow where he continued to preach. He was captured again, tortured, and crucified; his skin was cut from his body. But one of the female disciples covered his body with a piece of cloth, and this cloth miraculously changed into his skin. He died but was resurrected again on Sunday. He was then captured for the third time. But this time, the Queen, Natal'ya Kirillovna, who was ready to bear the future Emperor Peter the Great, had a prophecy that her child would be born in safety only if all prisoners obtained freedom. Ivan Suslov was liberated among them. He lived in Moscow for many years thereafter, eagerly spreading his teaching. In 1699, Danila Filippovich (who was already a hundred years old) came to Moscow from Kostroma to have a long talk with his divine son. It is told that on 1 January 1700, after a long ecstatic session (*radenie*), Danila Filippovich in the presence of all his followers ascended to Heaven. Suslov left Moscow, wandered in Russia for some years, and came back home before his death on his centennial birthday. The sectarians believed he died only as flesh but his soul ascended in glory to Heaven to join his divine Father.

Suslov was followed by Prokopy Lupkin and there appeared a number of "Christs" after him. The sect of the Christ-believers was not a coherent, unified trend; it was divided into different branches, according to their understanding of the idea of Christ's incarnation; most of the sectarians treated their leaders as images of Christ and not as later reincarnations of the Son.<sup>1</sup>

The main novelty in the Christ-believers' communities was their interest in the allegorical interpretation of the Bible according to the new revelations of the Holy Ghost. The way of salvation nevertheless remain unchanged: asceticism and unity with the Holy Ghost in mystical prayer sessions.

A. P. Schapov, well-known in the nineteenth century as a researcher of the sectarian movements, wrote that the self-proclamation of the simple

peasants as "christs-redemptors" and of peasant women to be "our ladies" was a mystical apotheosis, or religious and mystical expression of the hopes of the oppressed serf-peasant rural population: crude, wild, self-styled confirmation of their human dignity and their civil rights (Schapov, 1867, p. 188). Christ-believers were sure that the world was devoid of grace, that it was filled with evil, but eschatological ideas as such were not widespread here. The sectarians were interested not in the coming end of the world but in their personal renewal (the inner feeling of this renewal) in God's Kingdom established on earth.<sup>2</sup> Despite their real status and social existence, they were certain that they were "God's people": "You are fools, you are fools, simple village men. And these fools are like beets with honey.<sup>3</sup> But in these fools the Lord God dwells too" (a sectarian verse).

The principle, "Believe in the Holy Ghost," which was a foundation of the Christ-believers' tradition, determined the vague, fluid, amorphous nature of the understanding of the revelation; this circumstance called to life new sectarian leaders—"christs"; it also stimulated transformation of the original ideology, and even the appearance of radically new ideas and trends.

### III. THE CASTRATI

THE CASTRATI sect, in its genesis, was closely connected with the sect of Christ-believers. Considering castration to be the main and principal condition of salvation, it was the logical completion of the ascetic program of the Christ-believers.

The first sources on the history of the Castrati (*Skoptsy* in Russian) were the police investigation documents. The first official reaction to the Castrati's activities was the decree of the Empress, Catherine II, (2 June 1772) to Colonel (then State Councilor) Alexander Volkov ordering him to investigate and judge the *Skoptsy* from the town of Orel (central Russia). In 1807, the Holy Synod proclaimed the Castrati sect to be the most dangerous and blasphemous heresy, and in 1835, this definition was included in the Law Codex of the Russian Empire. The Senate defined the Castrati as "the enemies of humankind, destroyers of the morals, criminals against laws—Divine and civil" (Varadinov, 1863, p. 84). In 1836, the heads of the districts were ordered to make lists of the Castrati sectarians; in the next year a decree appeared which forbade giving the Castrati prizes and signs of distinguished service.



The founder of the Castrati sect was a peasant from the district of Orel, Kondraty Selivanov. If the main idea of the Christ-believers was the perpetual and continuous reincarnations of Christ and his permanent presence on the earth, the Castrati had only one Christ, who descended to the earth for the second time, being incarnated in Russia. This Christ was Selivanov. He was also believed to be Emperor Peter III, because this time Christ appeared in his glory and not in the "image of a slave."<sup>4</sup> His mission of redemption was to explain the way of salvation, that is, castration. Selivanov was considered by his followers to be the author of "Strady" ("Sufferings", or "Labours"), a special kind of auto-hagiography, and of "Epistles."

Selivanov began to preach in one of the Christ-believers' communities ("ships") in the 1770s. He had to escape persecution from his former fellow worshipers as well as from the authorities. He was arrested and exiled to Siberia where he lived in the town of Irkutsk. In 1795, he suddenly appeared in Moscow as Peter III.<sup>5</sup> Selivanov was arrested again and sent to St. Petersburg where he probably had a conversation with the son of Peter III, the reigning Emperor, Paul I (who hated his mother Catherine II and admired his father). Selivanov recommended that the Emperor castrate himself (there is a sectarians' poem about this conversation). As a result, he was put into an insane asylum. But at the beginning of the reign of Alexander I (1802), he was liberated at the request of the rich Castrati-merchants of St. Petersburg; after this he lived in liberty in their mansions. During this time Selivanov became very famous in the aristocratic circles of St. Petersburg; many very high officials and individuals from the nobility visited his ecstatic sessions (*radenie*). According to one of the spiritual songs of the Castrati, Selivanov even had a secret meeting with the Emperor Alexander I during which "his grandfather," Selivanov, gave a prophecy to the Czar about the defeat of the Russian troops at Austerlitz (during the war of Russia, Prussia, and Austria against Napoleon). In 1817, the merchant Solodovnikov built a mansion especially for Selivanov, where, during the mystical ecstatic sessions, two to three hundred believers gathered.

In 1820, Selivanov was taken by the authorities to Spaso-Efimievsky monastery (the town of Suzdal') where he was completely isolated.<sup>6</sup> He died in 1832, when he was extremely old (probably more than one hundred years old), but his followers were sure that he only went into occultation and would be changed

soon into his new appearance and glorification; it would be the beginning of the apotheosis of the Castrati right in this earthly life.<sup>7</sup>

The history of Christianity contains some isolated instances of the individual fanatical "struggle with the flesh" in the form of castration: "...there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 19:12). But in Russia, in the second part of the eighteenth century and in the first part of the nineteenth century, the Castrati sect became a mass religious movement engaging hundreds of thousands of people in its activities. Persecution by the authorities could neither destroy the sect nor discredit its charms, so attractive to a part of the Russian population. Repression only stimulated religious fanaticism, making the sectarians' faith in the truthfulness of their chosen way stronger.<sup>8</sup> Exiles stimulated the spreading of the Castrati's ideas outside both capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg) as well as outside the inner provinces and districts of the empire: in such regions as the Urals, Siberia, Caucasus, Bessarabia, and so on. The Castrati's way of life, based on the principles of their faith, was also very attractive to common people. All objective observers noted that the Castrati were very hardworking and industrious; their ordinary life was cleaner and more authentic than the ordinary life of the nonsectarian population. For example, the Castrati who lived in Yakutia, with its severe polar climate, were engaged in agriculture, they grew millet, and they were famous for their rejection of drinking and for their moderate behavior.

In the first part of the nineteenth century, the Castrati sect was practically spread through all of Russia (with the exception of eight districts), but in the second half of the nineteenth century it probably consisted of only some thousands of followers (mostly merchants, salesmen, craftsmen, etc.). One of the analytical notes of the Ministry of Inner Affairs stated that "the forces of the Castrati are not great, only some thousands in the whole Empire and the sectarians as such could not do anything but by possessing colossal monetary resources they were able to stimulate disorders" (Nadezhdin, 1872, p. 167).

#### Neo-Castrati Sect

THE NATURAL decline of religious fanaticism in the process of the "routinization of charisma," described by Max Weber, led to the rejection of the practice of castration, that is, a return to the Christ-believers' variety of asceticism ("spiritual castra-

tion"). But on the other hand it also stimulated some attempts to revive the original enthusiasm.

At the beginning of the 1870s, in Moldavia (and later, in the Crimea), there appeared the so-called Neo-Castrati movement. To overcome a crisis in the movement, its leaders proclaimed a new coming of the Father-Redemptor. At the end of 1871, and in the first half of 1872, a circle of "Chosen Ones" (about forty individuals) was established; they were responsible even for the theoretical elaboration of the teaching (conversations about angels, the soul, the Holy Ghost, etc.). The "Holy Chosen Ones" were called "the door to salvation"; it was proclaimed that the Redemptor, transfigured in their souls, would act through them as through His capital and spiritual government. According to this trend of the sect, the teaching of the Holy Chosen Ones had its source in the precious store of the previous messages of the Redemptor: it had its roots in the Book of Seven Seals spoken of in the Revelation of St. John and which was unsealed by the Only Born, God's Son, Jesus Christ, but the Holy Chosen Ones obtained the power to complete and to fulfill everything given in the Revelation due to their "holy vocation." Soon the time would come when the Redemptor Peter III (Selivanov) will appear on earth, changing the existing order of things and judging everybody; then the Castrati will obtain freedom and peace.

Christ, God's Son, who was born from the Virgin Maria and appeared in the person of Kondraty Selivanov (Peter III), now entered the body of Kuz'ma Lisin, who was a peasant tailor. In his spiritual quest he was a member of such rationalistic sects as *Dukhobors* (Spiritual Fighters) and *Molokans* (Sect of the Spiritual Milk), but after a serious illness caused by "warmth of the soul" he castrated himself with "the great seal" (i.e., cut off not only his testicles but his *membrum virile* as well). In his prophecies he declared that he would go to St. Petersburg where the Czar will recognize him, giving him a seat at his right hand and ordering the liberation of all the Castrati. Lisin sent his preachers forth throughout Russia. In the ecstatic sessions, he gave them appointments after which they had to leave their families and native places to go and preach Lisin's revelations. At his trial (1876) he said: "According to the prophesy I was recognized as the Redemptor, and I believed in it." He did not apostasize his faith and his mission, either during the trial or in prison. The researchers about this movement noted that it was important to believe in the possession of a spiritual force which is able to

transfigure believers into beings of a special nature (Sakharov, 1877, pp. 400-447).

The last Castrati communities were liquidated in Soviet Russia at the end of the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s, but some old sectarians can be still found in the rural districts of Russia.

Like the Christ-believers, the Castrati rejected the authority of the Bible, believing in the revelations of the Holy Ghost which were contained in their spiritual verses. These verses contained basic ideas of the Castrati's worldview, some events of the history of the sect, and moral norms and principles. These verses—*raspevtsy* ("preliminary songs")—were sung during the prayer meetings of the sectarians (*radenie*), the ecstatic practice of which was inherited by the Castrati from the Christ-believers.

In the view of the Castrati, the principal evil of the world is rooted in *lepost'* (bodily beauty, sexuality, sex appeal, etc.) which prevents people from communicating with God.<sup>9</sup> The way to perfection begins with the elimination of the cause, to be followed by the liberation of heart and mind. Castration as an elimination of the roots of *lepost'* determines the overcoming of all weaknesses and sins caused by *lepost'*. From the Russian popular faith the Castrati inherited a vague, amorphous, and unstable understanding of the heavenly powers and the mystery of redemption. G. Fedotov (1991, pp. 37-38) noted that the people did not forget about the soteriological meaning of the Cross, but had a very weak idea of the sacrificial meaning of Christ's death. According to folk beliefs, the central event in Christ's mission of redemption was the baptism of Christ (and the popular Russian name of Christianity is "baptismal faith"), and the Castrati also understood "the baptizing with fire" (castration) as redemption. The information obtained from the Castrati did not contain any specific data regarding the rites accompanying the castration. Castration "whitens" the body and soul, causing the castrated one to be inspired by the direct contemplation of God.

The Castrati in fact had no teaching about the resurrection of the dead and about the fate of the souls of dead people at all. They rejected prayers for the dead and had no special burial rites (there were only rare testimonies that the dead were buried in the ritual prayer vestments).<sup>10</sup>

The Castrati community existed as an independent kingdom with the founder of the community at its head. The communities were called "ships" and their leaders—"captains," "masters," and "prophets" (but not "Christs" in the manner of the

Christ-believers). Every "ship" had its master and teacher, chosen from among "the prophets"; this position could be given to either a man or a woman. The "Captain" was a keeper of the faith and something like a manager of the communal life. The "She-captain" was an assistant of the male "Captain" and coordinator. The members of the community were called "brothers-captains," "white sheep," "pigeons," "birds of paradise," and so on.

The building which was used for the prayer meetings (sometimes it was called "cathedral") was no different from the houses of common people or from the usual huts of the peasants. The prayer room was large (for fifty or even a hundred participants); it contained benches along the walls. The rite of consecration of such rooms is unknown to us. The room was often divided into two parts: for male and female believers. The portrait of Selivanov was often hung on the wall. The Castrati from the town of Saratov often said that they had no need of the churches: their own bodies, as the place where the Holy Trinity dwelled, were better temples than ordinary churches.

The Castrati's attitude towards the cult of icons and relics was definitely negative. They said: "We have live images/icons and live relics" or "Icons are made by human hands; they do not hear, they do not speak, and thus, they are not able to send any happiness to us." So, they treated the Orthodox Christians as the idolatrous pagans. The Castrati from the town of Kaluga said about the Orthodox icons: "There is grass (i.e., colors) in front and wood behind."

Nevertheless, they did not protest against the Orthodox pictures of didactic character that had no "mysterious" meaning. For example, at the home of one of the Castrati, a lithograph printed with the approbation of the Moscow spiritual censure was found: in its center, Christ was depicted as a kind shepherd with a sheep in his hands and angels around them, as if they were dancing in a circle. Around Christ there was the inscription: "I have found the lost sheep." The title of the picture was: "The True Image of Repentance."

The picture "Crucifixion of Flesh" was also very popular among the Castrati and Christ-believers. It was approved by the spiritual censure (1845) and printed in Moscow. It contained the image of a Christian who won victory over his flesh, allegorical images of the world, the Devil, and a person who obtained monastic dignity and took Christ's Cross:

there was an image of a monk crucified on the cross holding a lamp in each hand, with a lock on his mouth (i.e., keeping silent); to the right there was an image of the Flesh as a woman with a Turkish-style dress—she stood on hell, shooting with a bow into the monk; in front of the monk stood the Devil giving the monk a piece of paper attached to a spear, with the inscription, "Go down from the cross"; a falcon sat on the spear. Behind the Flesh there was an image of a Church, and the image of Christ was placed above everything—he held the crown in one hand and the laurels in the other (arrows, swords, and a shield were depicted to the side of Christ).

The everyday clothes of the male believers did not differ from the clothes of the followers of the Orthodox Church. Women did not wear ornaments such as earrings and finger rings; their heads were covered by black cloths. During the prayer sessions the Castrati wore special long white shirts; in some communities the women wore a dress over the shirt. During the sessions the sectarians were barefooted or used special simple socks. Among the essential paraphernalia of the sessions was a piece of white cloth or handkerchief which was called "cover" or "banner." It was used in different ways during the prayer sessions, playing the role of a symbol of purity; sometimes the sectarians raised it up as a flag or put it on the face of the "prophet" absorbed in a deep trance, and so on.

#### IV. THE PRACTICE OF ECSTASY (*RADENIE*)

THE SECTARIANS believed that the practice of prayer meetings with ecstatic dances was established by God. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a sympathetic priest from the village of Knyaz (district of Kaluga) found for them some relevant texts from the Bible (verses dedicated to King David dancing around the Tabernacles of the Testament). In addition, they were probably following the explanations of some person who was certain that Jesus practiced *radenie* in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke, 22:44).

The descriptions of the practice of the ecstatic meetings of *radenie* left by the Castrati or some sympathetic persons show that in the different "ships" this practice had different special features: there were no strict and rigid established rules beyond the necessary minimal set of the elements of the service (prayers, singing, dances, prophesying).



Some examples:

1. The recollections of F. P. Lubyansky (later he became a Senator) about his visit to Selivanov's apartments in St. Petersburg when he became a witness of the *radenie*:

There were in that place a god-mother, an old but still healthy woman, and prophetesses. Four of the prophetesses entered the room; they were pale but strong and good-looking girls. They bowed to the Savior, received his blessing, and stood in a circle holding each other's hands. When the Savior gave his permission, they began to whirl—as a whirling wheel. Continuing their whirling they began not to sing but to howl. This time, four men who were sitting on a bench with leather gloves on their hands applauded them with great vigor. I could not understand the words because of the noise though, the old man (i.e., Selivanov) as it seemed to me, tried to amuse me by saying a number of times that he rejected everything, giving everything to God. (Lubyansky, 1872, p. 475)

2. Information (recorded in 1846; in Mel'nikov, 1869, pp. 288-291) of a retired *fel'dfebel'* (low ranking member of the old Russian army) Nikolai Ivanov (who became a member of the sect in Kronshtadt, the central base of the Russian Navy near St. Petersburg). In his circle, the "Sufferings" of Selivanov were read, and the readers cried with many tears. He seldom participated in the ecstatic sessions because health problems prevented him from dancing. He refused to be castrated. In 1813 he left the sect and married.

Ivanov was led to a room with a large carpet having the images of angels and archangels. He was afraid to step on the holy images...He saw a bed which was extremely richly decorated with gorgeous covers and golden ornaments. On the bed lay an old man clothed in a thin, batiste shirt. The accompanying persons called him "God."

He was ordered to go to the prophet. He bowed, remaining on his knees, and the prophet promised him "a golden diadem and deathless clothes." After this, Ivanov was led to the so-called "Cathedral," or "Place of the Gatherings" (*Sobor*). This was a large room where there were many chairs along the walls and more than a hundred persons. All of them were dressed in long white shirts; they were singing and dancing in two rows (called "to go by the ship"). In the small space left by them in the center of the circle, a number of people were whirling. Ivanov sat on a chair, his knees covered with the white cloth (a symbol of purity). He was also told by an attendant

of Selivanov to sing together with the whirling persons, applauding with his hands in accordance with the rhythm of the songs. It lasted until the evening. About nine o'clock, the singing and dancing suddenly stopped for five minutes, and the dead silence changed them. After this, the people began to sing: "Kingdom, Kingdom, Spiritual Kingdom; in you, in this Kingdom the great Grace lies." And then silence reigned again.

Ivanov continues:

Suddenly, the doors opened, and the god, dressed in a short green silk robe, quietly entered the room. He was supported by two men called John the Baptist and Peter the Apostle. They were dressed in dark priestly robes with belts. Seeing them, everybody fell on their knees and the god waved with his white batiste cloth speaking thus: "My holy cover is above all of you."

Then he came to the women's room (the separation of the sexes during the meetings was established by Selivanov himself—see Men'shenin, 1904, p. 40).

The women's chapel was located in the neighboring room, and there was a broad window on the wall which divided the two rooms: it was opened when the god came there. There was a bed near the window and the god sat on it. John the Baptist and Peter the Apostle also stayed in the women's room at the god's bed. The prophetesses began to prophesy for the god, and after that everybody (men and women) began to whirl. The god stayed there about an hour; then he went away followed by the same persons who followed him before. The window to the women's room was closed again but the whirling dances did not stop.

About midnight, all the whirling people began to jump together, and the walls were trembling. The people cried: "Ai, Spirit!" I was frightened greatly and was going to escape from them through the window but was stopped. Suddenly the cries were changed into the quiet singing: "King God, King God." Then everybody began to whirl again.

Soon the session finished, and all the participants went home, but I stayed to sleep in the same building, in a special apartment with a man who led me there. The second day was like the first one, and I left them only on the third day.

3. The following description is taken from information collected by P. I. Mel'nikov about the Castrati "ship" in the town of Alatyry (district of Simbirsk) in the family of merchant Milyutin (Mel'nikov, 1873, pp. 55-124):



Melyutin's sister, Natal'ya Mikhailovna, was called "The Vital Book" because she knew the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament by heart; she interpreted the Bible according to the teaching of the sect. The Castrati joined the tradition of the oral commentaries on the Bible not because of inner motives but because of the need to speak with the "profane world" in its own language. Natal'ya Mikhailovna taught (and it was also the doctrinal position of the Castrati from Nizhny Novgorod as well) that Adam and Eve were immaterial creatures without flesh, and that they had no genitalia, but seduced by the Devil, they ate the forbidden fruit and their bodies obtained imitations of the apples: breasts for women and testicles for men. When she was asked how procreation was possible without genitalia (as the Lord God ordered it), she answered that God was an omnipotent being; and He could make children for Abraham from stones (Matthew 3:9).

The ecstatic sessions took place in Milyutin's house, and people from other towns often participated in them; the number of participants was more than a hundred. The sessions took place at night; men wore special long shirts, and the women were clothed in simple dresses. The sectarians bowed in front of the portraits of the Castrati Masters: Selivanov, Shilov, and Milyutin. Men and women sat separately.

The sessions began by singing the ritual song, "Give us, O Lord, Jesus," then another song was sung: "O, Jesus Christ, our Light, be merciful to us. O, God's Son, O, you, Holy Ghost, our Light, be merciful to us! O, you, Mother, who bore God, our Light, be merciful to us! And save us, God's People, who pray hard on the earth!"

Milyutin proclaimed:

"Bless us, O the Highest Creator, Merciful our Father to sing your song to see everybody in the glory!" The people replied with the song about Father Redemptor coming in glory from the city of Irkutsk: "...You are with us, King as the King and God as the God! He is with us, our falcon, our Lord Holy Ghost! He passed through fire, fire and flame, fire and flame. He is going, he is coming to the royal towns. To the royal towns, places of the paradise to the house of David, to the mystery of God. The mystery of God is completing now. And there resides in the house of David God's grace and all the blessed, and all angels and all archangels with the cherubs and seraphim and all the powers of Heaven..."

This song stimulated euphoria in the sectarians. They stood in a circle, beginning the dances, singing other songs. Then different

kinds of individual and joint ecstatic dances took place and whirling more and more rapidly... Sometimes the whirling was so strong that its wind blew out the fire of the candles. Everybody danced, jumped, and whirled until complete exhaustion and delirium which was thought to be the revelation of the Holy Ghost. And even the floor became wet from sweat, and the clothes remained wet for some hours.

After Milyutin's sign, the individual *radenie* finished and the sectarians began *radenie* by "ship": everybody began dancing in a circle or jumping. Other kinds of dances, whirling and jumping, also were in use. Then there was prophesying, followed by the convulsive movements of the prophets. Other witnesses also described the same elements of the sessions—singing, joint and individual dances, exhausting whirling—to obtain the ecstasy of the presence of the Holy Ghost within the bodies of the sectarians, prophets, and so on. It is interesting that one of the witnesses (peasant Ivan Andreanov, a member of Aleksey Gromov's "ship") said that *radenie* (or "spiritual bathing") demanded silence and complete mindfulness without thinking: otherwise the Holy Ghost would not be able to enter the body of the sectarian. The same witness also related that a neophyte entering the "ship" must accept some commandments: he/she must refuse to drink wine or beer, and must live without "passions." Neophytes were also forbidden to participate in all secular holidays and festivals. It was said that if they would follow these commandments they could become cherubs, angels, prophets, or spiritual teachers. The sectarians had to keep their teachings and practice in complete secrecy. One female sectarian (Avdot'ya Ivanovna by name) reported: "It is so nice. And the bliss is great, and when you entered this state there was no more memory of yourself, no memory of other people—only inner light existed and there was nothing around you" (Kel'siev, 1869, p. 4). The sectarians also said that the power of the Holy Ghost during the prophecies embraced all the personality of the prophet, and all his/her humanness became "dead" during the prophesying. And this state was accompanied by the feeling of great and powerful joy and bliss.

It is interesting to consider the issue of the relationship between the ecstatic nature of the Castrati cult and the phenomenon of ritual castration as such. Certainly, from the strictly historical point of view, the Castrati inherited their ecstatic sessions, whirling, dances, jumping, and so on from the

maternal sect of the Christ-believers. But this connection is too simple to explain this phenomenon. The Castrati did not reject the Christ-believers' practice; it can even be said that they made it more expressive and accentuated.

Besides the Castrati sect, we know about at least one more religious cult where castration and the extreme forms of religious ecstatic worship were mixed together: it is the ancient Hellenistic (of Phrygian origin) cult of Attis and Great Mother Cybele. The priests of this cult were the castrated *galli*, who served this divine couple through ecstatic dances and trances. One point here is of special importance: Russian sectarians, as well as believers in the Phrygian god, had a cult of an extremely ecstatic ("Dionysian") character, which at first glance may seem rather strange for the religion of the castrates. To help explain this we will take the liberty of repeating a rather long passage on the subject from an article published recently by one of us (Tortchinov, 1998):

The ecstatic character of such cults (the extreme form of which is orgiastic trance) is rather widespread in different mystery cults, e.g., in the mysteries of Dionysus, which included the excessive worship of *maenads*, the female votaries of this god, who in their wild ecstasy tore apart the bodies of animals and even human beings.

Here I must mention the transpersonal phenomenon, which Grof called the "Volcanic" or "Dionysian" ecstasy. It is distinctly opposite to the "Apollonic" or "Oceanic" ecstasy corresponding with BPM [Basic Perinatal Matrix] I and its feelings of quietude, serenity, and unity with all forms of existence.

The Volcanic ecstasy has been characterized by Grof as having extreme physical and emotional expression, a high degree of aggression, destructive impulses of inner and outer orientation, powerful impulses of a sexual nature, and rhythmical orgiastic movements. It is a unique mixture of emotional and physical suffering together with wild sensual passion and desire. Here love is the same as hate, the agony of death is the joy of rebirth, apocalyptic horror is the excitement of the creation, and so on.

A person feels the coming of the great event—of spiritual liberation or *unio mystica*. But even if this feeling is of great force, it cannot attain its realization and the completion of the dramatic sequence of death and rebirth: Volcanic ecstasy corresponds to BPM III, the states of which need for their realization the transition to the experience of BPM I or BPM IV (Grof, 1993, p. 337).

The feelings and images of religious nature which correspond to the Volcanic ecstasy are

bloody sacrifices, the Black Sabbath of the witches, Dionysian orgies, and so on.

To me, the rites of the suffering gods (especially as explicitly given in the mysteries of Attis, with their flagellations, bloody wounds, and self-castrations) represent this type of ecstasy with the passage to the illuminating ecstasy of BPM IV. But why is this kind of ecstasy especially related to masochism and self-castration?

It has been noted by Grof, a transpersonal psychologist, that the recollections about pain in the perinatal experience during psychedelic sessions (the most painful impressions are related with BPM III) express themselves in the patient's striving to be rescued from pain through following pain to the source of pain (i.e., to the place of suffering in the body or the painful organ).

Note here another important detail. The experience of BPM III is rooted in that stage of the birth process when synergism of the mother-and-child takes on the character of struggling and even hostility. The associations with the feelings of the victims of rape are rather widespread in this case (the feeling of fear, hypoxia, the attempts to obtain freedom, the enforced sexual excitement, etc.). This painful experience has some common features with the experience of BPM III (this circumstance increases the psychic trauma of the victim of a real rape—Grof, 1993, p. 237)...In addition, subjects, who have experienced BPM III in psychedelic sessions often compare the birth process with the process of the sexual (especially, enforced) act. But what in such cases does the self-castration mean?

I think that its basis consists of a complex of experiences grounded in the ecstatic states of BPM III: the attempt to counteract the pain caused by the situation of the synergetic conflict with the maternal body and the attitude about the negation of the birth process associated with sexual intercourse. It is a physical expression of the negation of the birth process (which is the process of the extrusion of the foetus from the maternal body) or through the coming back to the blissful synergism of BPM I...or through the completion of this process in the birth/rebirth which leads to establishing of a principally new unity with the mother...The same idea lies in the meaning of the theme of incest, which is especially clear in the mystery myths of the Dionysian cycle...Archetypically, incest rejects the birth process as some progressive act: in incest this process turns to its source signaling the attitude of coming back to the womb to restore the basic synergetic unity with the maternal body to attain the perfect union with the female/maternal principle archetypically represented in the image of Cybele as *Magna Mater*, as Mother par excellence.

Here, we can recollect some ideas of the Russian religious thinker V. V. Rozanov (1856-



1919), who wrote about the extremely feminine character of the founder of the Russian sect of eunuchs (*skoptsy*), Kondraty Selivanov, for whom self-castration was like cutting off an unuseful and alien detail so as to realize the perfectly feminine type of personality (Rozanov, 1914). (Tortchinov, 1998, pp. 157-158)

Therefore, we can find the transpersonal roots of the Castrati sectarians in the perinatal impressions as well as in the psychological attitude towards imitations of feminine patterns of behavior.

### Notes

1. One of the most influential developments of the Christ-believers was the group of the "fasting" founded by a serf peasant from the district of Tambov, Abbakum Kopylov. He taught that Christ was a holy Spirit dwelling in the flesh chosen, that was in himself, then in his son Filipp, then in his son's wife. The long fasts, lasting for 7-10 days, played an important role in their practice; there existed strict food limitations among them. The prize for their asceticism was a "spiritual joy" obtained during ecstatic joint prayer sessions.

After A. Kopylov's death, a schism occurred among the followers (1830's). Its initiator was Kopylov's worker, Perfil Katasonov, who founded a new group called "Israel," or "Old Israel." He considered himself and his followers to be "the chosen people" who would establish God's Kingdom on the earth. In fifty years, in different districts of Russia, there existed more than 20,000 of his followers. But after the death of this charismatic leader "Israel" lost its unity. From the remnants of this group appeared "New Israel" headed by the new Christ—Mokshin. After Mokshin, a peasant from the district of Voronezh, Vasily Lubkov, became their Christ; he was a protégé of Mokshin. Lubkov paid enormous attention to the strengthening of the hierarchy of the sect. At the end of the nineteenth century "New Israel" became a religious denomination with leaders who had unlimited authority and with strictly ordered praying sessions. There appeared theatricalized mysteries which presented different Biblical events: during the mystery, "The Last Supper," Lubkov chose his "evangelists," "apostles," and "prophets"; during the play of "The Mountain Sermon" he declared his teaching; he was also a central figure of the mystery "Transfiguration."

2. About the profundity and sympathetic energy of these feelings of the believers, see Mel'nikov's information: a certain *hlyst* (Christ-believer) told him: "I feel that throughout myself, inside of myself, there is a heavenly light and there is nobody but myself in the whole Universe; it means that God dwells in me, and without God there is nothing to be what began to be [the last words are a citation from the Russian translation of John 1:3 – Authors]. All the universe with God, I mean, entered my belly, and there was nothing but myself." Another story: when the *hlyst* "god mother" Avdot'ya Stchennikova was arrested (Nizhny Novgorod district, 1851) she entered a trance; leaving it,

she began to speak very rapidly in two voices—as herself speaking to Our Lady and as Our Lady answering (Mel'nikov, 1869, pp. 377, 379).

3. A popular peasant dessert dish.

4. In the texts ascribed to Selivanov there is no mention of his "royalty," but the Castrati tradition thought of him as "lord-father" Petr (Peter) Fedorovich, spiritually born from a righteous lady, Empress Elizaveta (Elizabeth) Petrovna, who left her throne (or according to some legendary versions—never ruled at all) to a court lady whose appearance was like that of the empress, changed her name to Akulina Ivanovna, and dwelled in the district of Orel. They believed that the new emperor, Peter III, castrated himself while he still lived in Germany; after a brief reign he knew that his wife Catherine (the future Empress Catherine II) was going to murder him, so he then left his palace in secrecy to preach "the fire baptism," that is, castration, among the common people.

5. Selivanov's identity as Peter III was "confirmed" by one of the Emperor's court servants, Semen Kobelev (born about 1740, during the reign of Elizaveta Petrovna, he served at the court of Great Prince Petr Fedorovich—the future Emperor Peter III). Kobelev was castrated at the end of the eighteenth century; in 1819 he was exiled to the Solovetsky monastery. A. P. Schapov noted about this case:

In the eighteenth century, when the slavery of serfs attained its climax and the power of crude force caused all human relations to be forgotten, there were spontaneous uprisings of a great number of serfs in one place or another and the serfs eagerly hoped for redemption. And just at this time Emperor Peter III gave the right of freedom [from governmental service] to the nobility. At that time, rumors began to spread among the common people that Peter III was going to liberate the peasants from slavery. Those rumors stimulated Pugachev [a leader of the great peasant rebellion] to declare himself to be Peter III [who was in reality murdered during a coup d'Etat by the supporters of his wife, Empress Catherine II]. And Kondraty Selivanov also proclaimed himself as Emperor Peter III. A great number of people followed both of them waiting for redemption from those two men. (Schapov, 1867, pp. 187-188)

6. In 1820 the Director of the Ministry of Inner Affairs, Count Kochubei, sent his resolution to the Abbot of Spaso-Efimievsky monastery, Parfeny, in which he insisted on the following points: (1) Kondraty Selivanov ("head of the Castrati") was forbidden to communicate with any person with the exception of those monks who may be appointed by the abbot for religious conversations and missionary preaching to Selivanov; (2) He was forbidden, as well, to receive posts or any other messages from outside (including money or parcels); Selivanov had to be completely isolated from outside communications; (3) His residing in the monastery had to be kept in secrecy. The monastery received from the state 600 rubles per year to pay for Selivanov's maintenance (later on it was reduced to 550 rubles) (Mainov, 1880, pp. 763; 766).

7. There is a spiritual song about the coming of Selivanov:

Heaven and Earth were quaking, all peoples and kings came to Russia, Emperor Alexander I and all his officials fell at Selivanov's feet. But an evil spirit confused their minds; everybody forgot who was the savior of Russia; Selivanov was exiled to Suzdal'. But God punished Russia: Petersburg suffered from a great flood (1824). Alexander I prayed to God and God mercifully pardoned him; the storm ended. Then, Emperor Nicolas I ordered that an empty coffin be buried as if Selivanov died so that the pilgrims would not go to Suzdal'. (Men'shenin, 1904, pp. 69-70)

8. One of the witnesses of the way the Castrati behaved themselves on the eve of their transportation to Siberia from the prison in Petershoff (one of the suburbs of St. Petersburg) reported: "Our consolations, our information, our recommendation for their way which could be helpful for them in their first steps on the alien side—nothing of these could be of interest to them or could touch them. They behave themselves as if they were in a kind of ecstasy, being ready to fight against exile; it could be seen that exile will neither break their character nor weaken their resolution. It seemed to us that they were people who were going to fight with a great amount of strength, that this most harsh punishment (i.e., exile) will reveal its completely ineffective nature and absolute emptiness, as if they were sure: we lived here, and we will be able to live there..." (Maksimov, 1869, pp. 334-335).

9. In the "Sufferings" Selivanov said: "...my soul hates *lepost'*: it is like the most furious serpent is eating the whole universe, taking humans from God and preventing them from being in union with God" (Men'shenin, 1904, p. 41).

10. The notes of a Castrate, Aleksey Elensky, contained the following discourse: "After death we do not rely on the prayers of living people or on priestly paraphernalia and ritual food. Everybody must by their faith, and even by all their life, create the image of Christ inside of themselves so as to be transfigured into Christ. If we pray to Christ we will be pardoned by Christ, and if we are pardoned by Christ we will be glorified in the image of the Son of God" (Elensky, 1867).

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